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## On Unity Experiences A Review

Sally Wilcox

*When I say “I am.” I do not mean a separate entity with a body as its nucleus. I mean the totality of being, the ocean of consciousness, the entire universe of all that is and knows.  
Sri Nisagargadatta Maharaj*

Unity is both complex and elegant which in itself reflects the Universe. Experiencing unity is examined philosophically as a natural human desire for reasoned reality. From a spiritual perspective it may be the return to our original divine essence. From a neuroscientific view, it may be neurocorrelates in the brain resonating with an electrical field. And from a physics perspective, it may be particle entanglement and spin-wave directionality. The debate is broad and deep. The prevailing western framework for exploring such a topic is rational cognitivism, and intersects several disciplines including; cognitive science, consciousness studies, neuroscience, philosophy, phenomenology, psychology and its subgroup transpersonal psychology, cosmology, spirituality, and most recently, quantum mechanics. Each of these frameworks engages a Cartesian-Newtonian methodology of dissecting component parts for study, and collecting empirical support for validation of the direct unity experience. There is a continued quest for reasoned certainty and absolutism with this method.

Alternatively, Eastern practices, particularly Buddhism, engage the disciplines of mindfulness, awareness and philosophical exploration. This is a discipline of openness that respects the *isness* of direct experience, unity experiences (UE's) included. There is no absolute knowing or need for empiricism. Those are concepts of the mind that are considered illusory. The exploration takes the researcher into dissolution of form, attachment and illusion, and what constitutes conceptual illusory coverings of Buddha potential in all sentient beings. What is currently emerging in researching human experience is a blending of Eastern and Western operational paradigms. The Dalai Lamas' interest and participation in neuroscientific research on meditating Buddhist monks attests to this development.

This literature review takes a meta-perspective in the discussion of unity and its apparent counterpoint, dualism. Definitions concerning unity experiences are embedded in the paper as we begin our exploration.

General themes addressed in this review of the literature include; subjective experience, experiential content and meaning-making, unity experience within a holographic framework, permeable membrane of perception in an autopoietic system, discrete and coherent perception of the discrete and coherent (repetition intentional). What is not addressed that may have some relevance to the unity experience, is cosmology and an in-depth review of the literature on neuroscience and physics. This paper focuses on the experience itself within an historical view of what has impacted our current thinking, and an East-West perspective on consciousness.

Phenomenology

It is valuable to give the reader a brief overview of the study of human experience which will frame the significant influences of how experience has been studied or the methodological approach. As any academic researcher knows, or should know, the methodological approach brackets the research and findings. The following is a historical tour of how human experience has been studied.

David Hume (1711-1776) explored the process of reasoning causality in psychological terms; his shift in methodology was of great influence in connecting the interior world of experience and the exterior world of causality. Exploring human interaction in the world engages the natural questions of what is reality and what is my place and purpose. This method objectifying the exterior world, continued to be the prevailing view; man as separate from his environment, but it heralded the beginning of a deep academic debate. The next major contributor to the debate was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who distinguished between objects as phenomena and objects as things, events or experience themselves or *noumena*. G.W. Hegel (1770-1839) shifted the philosophical discussion further by introducing *dialectical phenomenology* that seeks to explore the ontological and metaphysical Spirit behind the phenomena. He was overlapped and followed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) who tried to extract the essence of the experience of phenomena using an intuitive approach. This became known as *transcendental phenomenology*. Again there was a significant overlap in influential philosophers with the arrival of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). This overlap may or may not have been an unusual coincidence, but it offered a rich environment for philosophical debate. Heidegger explored the essential *beingness* and structural features of subject and object of the experience. Several other influential contributors to the philosophical debate concerning experience were Carl Jung (1875-1961) who dove into the structure of the psyche and the unconscious field. He discovered (or it was revealed to him) and explored fundamental archetypes operating on the human psyche. He paid particular attention to subtle or unconscious ways of knowing, as in dreams, which informed the individual consciousness and reflected a collective unconscious. Daniel Dennett is a cognitive scientist who criticized phenomenology as a method for its focus on the subjective which he called *autophenomenology*. As a scientist interested in consciousness, he advocates for a third person scientific approach, *heterophenomenology*, to studying the quality or essential *qualia* of experience. This differs slightly from Francisco Varela's approach of exploring phenomenology, where Varela's focus was on the experience itself as informative that needed no scientific validation for its existence. He takes as Buddhist approach that regards the *isness* of the experience as pure and researchable. Thus begins the integration of East-West psychology and philosophical debate that is not only transdisciplinary but integral (Dennett, 1991; Ferrer, 2002; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991; Wilber 2006).

One can see the progression of thought from a Cartesian separatist exploration where man is separate from the world around him, through a cognitive, rational discussion where meaning-making is essential, toward an integral approach in the exploration of experiencing the world as mysterious; thus reflecting a dynamic relationship with an experience of ubiquitous Absolute consciousness or the radiance of our being (Combs, 2002; Gebser, 1985; Grof & Grof, 1990). Ferrer (2002) argues that no one method should be privileged over another.

“ . . . the most energetic and widely discussed conceptual frameworks in transpersonal theory were marked by an increasingly intense commitment to a single absolute universal truth, stringent bivalent logic, and the construction of all-subsuming metasystems that confidently rejected or affirmed particular spiritual traditions and philosophical perspectives according to specific abstract criteria and ranked them in ascending evolutionary sequence. . . all asserted their positions against theoretical superstructures by which they felt marginalized, devalued, misinterpreted. (Tarnas in Ferrer, 2002, pp. xi-xiii).

Ferrer’s (2002) position is participatory, enactive and pluralistic where absolutism is replaced by a more open holistic, synergic dialogue across disciplines. This approach values the nuggets in each turn of the wheel and in each spiritual rendering of our relationship with a great Mystery. Ferrer (2002) writes,

The spiritual universalism of the participatory vision, then, does not establish any a priori hierarchy of positive attributes of the divine: Non dual insights are not necessarily higher than dual, nor are dual higher than non dual. Personal enactions are not necessarily higher than impersonal, nor impersonal higher than personal. And so forth. Since the mystery is intrinsically indeterminate, spiritual qualitative distinctions can not be made by matching our insights and conceptualizations with any pre-given features. In contrast, I suggest that qualitative distinctions among spiritual enactions can be made by not only evaluating their emancipatory power for self, relationships, and world, but also discriminating on how ground in or coherent with the mystery they are. . . In sum, *this vision brings forth a more relaxed and permissive spiritual universalism that passionately embraces (rather than reduces, conflates, or subordinates) the variety of ways in which the sacred can be cultivated and embodied, without falling into spiritual anarchy or vulgar relativism.* (pp.190-191).

### Perception

Our sense of the world around us not only informs the meaning we make of it but our relationship to it and all who inhabit it. If we are to ascribe to the scientific assumption that we live in a nested holographic universe where we are participating in its creation, then how we choose to explore a topic is as informative as the experience itself. Helen Palmer (1998) comments on inner ways of knowing:

Out of necessity, our attention is directed to the exterior world of objects and the people around us, as if we are separate from them – and of course we are, but only from the perspective of the outer senses. The possibility of more subtle senses, or so called organs of perception, for inner knowing are not commonly considered, not because they are new to the human condition, but because the sacred technologies that awaken subtle perceptions have fallen out of favor (p.xv).

Perception filters the information we take in and shapes the meaning we make of

reality. The concept of perception rivalry, similar to binocular rivalry, posits that to perceive something in particular natural filters are activated so that sensory overload does not occur (Edelman, 2000). This comment makes sense if we are looking at visual or auditory perception, where we may have only taken in some, but not all, of the information in any given situation. It may even make sense of mental-cognitive perception where our thoughts are influenced by our culture, race, gender and privilege filters that may block out some information; but what of perception that is subtle, intuitive and mindful? This form of mindful perception is more open and receptive to Mystery. (Braud, W. & Anderson, R., 1998). Is perception more of a circular and interactive relationship with a ubiquitous presence of information; a resonance with a subtle stochastic field of active information (Laszlo, 2004)? This field may be similar to Sheldrake's (1995) morphogenetic fields, he comments; "[m]orphogenetic fields can be regarded as analogous to the known fields of physics in that they are capable of ordering physical changes, even though they themselves cannot be observed directly" (p. 72).

The debate continues to locate and understand perceiving experience, and whether it is necessary to find answers at all. Perhaps cognitive supremacy is evolving toward a spiritual perception of Mystery, not to the exclusion of former structures but from a sense of abundance where all things are necessary in the striving for perception of our spiritual heritage and destiny (Combs, 2002; Gebser, 1985; Wilber 2006). (Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1962 trans.) offers this:

Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them: The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit expressions (x-xi).

Perception through our five senses, visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and taste, will not be discussed in this paper. What is of interest here is the perception or experience of unity, being at one with. In light of all the information that has been collected through the ages, perhaps we need to become more pliant in relationship to the world around us and employ multiple ways of knowing, including inner ways of knowing as Palmer (1998) suggests. This pliability may reveal some interesting findings. Root-Bernstein, M., & Root-Bernstein, R. (1999) suggest;

We desperately need synthetic minds. No major problem facing the world today can be boxed neatly within a single discipline or approached effectively by analysis, emotion, or tradition alone. Innovation is always transdisciplinary and multimodal. The future will therefore depend upon our ability to create synthetic understanding by integrating all ways of knowing. Recognizing this, Piet Mondrian called for the 'new man' who could meld the external world of perception and analysis with the internal world of feelings and emotions: "He will be distinguished precisely by the complete attention to everything external [and] will not rest until the external becomes pure expression of the *inner* and *outer* in one" (p. 314).

#### Unity Experiences (UEs)

As implied, a unity experience is the perception of unity of all things or the experience of no separation of self from the process and content of the experience. In the discussion of unity experiences, one might ask, unity with what? For the purpose of this paper we assume unity experience to be transpersonal, an experience not of an object, but of the relationship as oneness. Experience unity moves one from the rational mind of cognicentrism toward subtler forms of knowing and the felt sense (Palmer 1998). We remove some of the coverings and boundaries to an inner knowing. Metzner (1998) remarks:

In Buddhism we find the fascinating idea that not only vision but also thought is obstructed, with 'thought-coverings' (*citta-avarana*). These thought coverings are the result of emotional cravings and aversions, which cause us to have mental blocks, or conceptual blind spots, in certain areas. Transformed consciousness is a state in which an individual is freed from suffering, the emotional ups and downs, that stem from these unconscious mental blocks (p. 38).

Indigenous populations around the world, who have a direct relationship with the earth and acknowledge the *anima* or Spirit within all things, live the sacred in their everyday doings. They activate their connection with the Spirit world through rituals and ceremony (Some, 1998). I witnessed this in Peru studying with local shamans. Their fundamental ontology is that Spirit is ubiquitous. “The indigenous belief of the Dagara [an African tribe] is that we are primarily Spirit” (Some 1998, p. 61).

The transformative aspect of the sacred is noted by Metzner (1998);

Through experience of the sacred the mind grasps the difference between what is revealed as real, potent, rich, and meaningful and that which is deficient in those qualities – in other words, the chaotic and perilous flux of things, their fortuitous and meaningless appearances and disappearances. This kind of experience of a sacred quality of the world, of all life, and of our life plan in particular is often a significant element in the transformative experience ... (p. 11).

Language becomes challenging in describing the ineffable such as unity experiences as Grof (1998) suggests. Western languages are constructed with a subject and object, thus expressing duality or separation. Japanese, for example, is constructed with words that describe the felt sense, whatever it may be. “Those who are familiar with the Eastern spiritual philosophies, often resort to words from various Asian languages when describing their spiritual experiences and insights. . . [t]hese languages were developed in cultures with high sophistication in regard to holotropic states and spiritual realities” (Grof, 1998, p. 36).

This unity state of being is beyond ego agency (transpersonal), and is experienced as at one with (atonement) everything, not as object, but as a fluidity that transcends perceived boundaries. The cosmic consciousness state, (or conversion state), is characterized by D’Aquili and Newberg (1998) with a sudden onset, exhilarating view of reality and “a sense of purposefulness to the universe and to one’s place in the universe.” (p. 42). D’Aquili and Newberg describe these characteristics as:

A progressive blurring of the boundaries between entities until one finally moves into Absolute Unitary Being (AUB). The boundaries of entities within the world disappear, and even the self-other dichotomy is totally obliterated. In AUB there is no extension of space or duration of time (p. 43).

Wilber (2006) comments on peak experiences as being *one with* the phenomena and categorizes peak experiences within four categories, *Nature*, *Deity*, *Formless*, and *Non-Dual*. He elaborates;

The basic idea is that in each of the 4 major natural states, [magic, mythic, mental-rational, pluralistic] you can have a peak experience or intensification of that state. One of the ultimate peak experiences in any realm is to be *one with* the phenomena in that realm. To experience a oneness with all phenomena in the gross-waking state is a typical **nature mysticism**. To experience a oneness with all phenomena in the subtle-dream state is a typical **deity mysticism**. To experience a oneness with all phenomena (or lack thereof) in the causal-unmanifest state is a typical **formless mysticism**. To experience a oneness with all phenomena arising in gross, subtle and causal states is a typical **non-dual mysticism**. (p.93)

Grof (1998) discusses unity as Absolute Consciousness - the ground of all being or soul. Experiencing Absolute Consciousness transcends ego boundaries and the rational-cognitive mind and according to Grof; “it is a process of realizing that all boundaries (in the material world and other realities) are “arbitrary and negotiable” (p. 38). He comments;

When we reach experiential identification with absolute consciousness, we realize that our own being is ultimately commensurate with the entire cosmic network, with all existence. The recognition of our own divine nature, our identity with the cosmic source, is the most important discovery we can make during the process of deep self-exploration. . . [p]eople who achieve in their inner exploration the identification with Absolute Consciousness often experience fascinating insights into the dynamic of creation (Grof, 1998, pp. 38-42).

I question Grof’s use of the word “achieve” which denotes some kind of hierarchical attainment, or spiritual high ground, and as we have seen from Ferrer’s (2002) reaction to this form of competition, it can do nothing but demean those who have not yet had a unity experience. I would rather suggest that removing barriers to the experience, such as creating a slowing down in the distractions of life, or developing a meditation practice, might increase availability and receptivity to unity experiences. Targ and Katra (1999) posit that removing barriers to Unity consciousness allows for a flow into an active information field. “Unity consciousness extends itself through space and time, seeking to amplify itself wherever minds remove the barriers to their connections” (Targ & Katra, 1999, p. 271). They speak of “love as the active information that organizes the substance of living forms (the body) when barriers to its expression or reception are removed” (p. 271).

This active information field is what Ervin Laszlo (2004) refers to as the Akashic Field. “there is not only matter and energy in the universe, but also a more subtle yet real element: information in the form of active and effective ‘in-formation’” (Laszlo, 2004, p. 46). Low (2002) echoes this sentiment,

Buddhism has the notion of the Alaya vijñāna, or the storehouse consciousness, because it is said to contain all memories of all individual lives and therefore the seeds of all phenomena. (pp. 90-91).

Perhaps this is why so many unity and ecstatic experiences have this quality of unbounded love. “The burning longing for unity bears the name of love. And it comes from an underlying feeling of separation, incompleteness” (Low, 2002, p. 139). This sentiment is echoed by Eliade & Sullivan (1993) “The term center of the world refers to that place where all essential modes of being come together” (p. 166). Campbell and Moyers (2000) also discussed this return to unity;

Elliot speaks about the still point of the turning world, where motion and stasis are together, the hub where the movement of time and the stillness of eternity are together. (Moyers, p.273) That’s the inexhaustible center that is represented by the Grail. When life comes into being, it is neither afraid nor desiring, it is just becoming. Then it gets into being, and it begins to be afraid and desiring. When you get rid of fear and desire and just get back to where you’re becoming, you’ve hit the spot. (Campbell, p.273)

Unity experiences occur through the dissolution of egoic states that create the illusion of separateness. Releasing ego agency and egocentric thinking places one in an open and receptive state, it creates a gap between thoughts, a space where the sacred can be experienced. This stillness is referred to as sacred space; it is our first step in an initiation into the sacred realm (Halifax, 2004). This shift from *apart from* to *apart of* is often described as occurring in a realm beyond time and beyond material where anima or spirit is perceived as infusing all things. Experiencing unity brings one into direct contact with unbounded wholeness. It is often described as a mystical, ecstatic or religious experience (Grof, 1998, Harvey 1996). “The mystic’s gift . . . is the nondual integration of all objects and subjects – even beyond the union of intersubjects in universal *communion*” (de Quincey, 2005, p. 243). Physicist David Bohm has written probingly on wholeness and the implicate order and comments; “Mind and matter are not separate substances. Rather, they are different aspects of one whole and unbroken movement” (Bohm, 1980, p. 11).

Unity experiences are understood to be non-ordinary consciousness events or altered states of consciousness (ASC). (Grof 1996, Dennett 1991, Jahne & Dunne 1987). Futurist Ervin Laszlo describes;

In the ‘experience of dual unity’, a patient in an ASC experiences a loosening and melting of the boundaries of the body ego and a sense of merging with another person in a state of unity and oneness. In this experience, despite the feeling of being fused with another, the patient retains an awareness of his or her own identity . . . In the still more embracing experience of “oneness with Life and all Creation”, an



individual expands his/her consciousness to such an extent that it encompasses the totality of life on this Planet including all of humanity and all the flora and fauna of the biosphere. Instead of identification with one living organism, the patient identifies with Life itself as a *cosmic* phenomenon. (Laszlo, 1996, pp. 5-6).

Carl Jung's view was one of *unus mundus* ". . . that the multiplicity of the empirical world rests on an underlying unity, and that not 2 -or-more fundamentally different worlds exist side-by-side or are mingled with one another" (Jung, 1958, p. 747).

Theillard de Cardin (1956, 1959, 1960) questioned the relationship between his experiences of unity, his Jesuit training and the role of Mankind in this physical form. He reconciled these within a monist or unity stance, as opposed to a pluralist position of joining together separate components, where ". . . nothing exists or finally matters except for the *Whole*" (p. 48). He posits that the Earth is surrounded by a "thinking envelope – the Noosphere" that is adding to the "super organization of Matter upon itself [toward] the further liberation of consciousness" (Theillard de Chardin, 1959, p. 137). In this concept of the Noosphere, Theillard de Chardin suggests that while mankind's consciousness is evolving, so too is the Noosphere evolving towards mankind. Mankind is progressing along a trajectory of complexity toward a center point he calls the *Omega* point; he comments, "[l]et us suppose that from this universal center, this Omega point, there constantly emanate radiations hitherto only perceptible to those persons we call 'mystics'" (Theillard de Chardin, 1959, p. 127). Glimpses into this Omega point of both totality and emptiness are commonalities of unity experiences. Albert Low comments; "*Unity as wholeness is striving towards Unity as Omega point, the dynamic center of a universal consciousness*. Another word for striving is evolution ..." (Low, 2002, p. 52).

### Religious interpretations of UEs

In an attempt to make meaning of out of the ordinary consciousness experiences, many of which border on ecstatic and mystical, people for millennia have turned to their spiritual teachings to both reflect and interpret unity experiences, UE's (Campbell & Moyers, 2000). It is no surprise then that UEs are found in Tao Sufi Buddhist and Christian writings.

The Buddha sat in contemplation until he reached enlightenment or Nirvana. Nirvana or enlightenment is awareness of the Truth or God as "the final nature and total structure of reality" (Thurman, 1995, p. 9). The unity experience opens the individual to aspects of this fundamental structure of reality (Capra, 2000; Low, 2002). This opening is a non-dual state of boundlessness (Halifax, 2004; Harvey, 1996; Russell 2003; Wilber 2006). The experience itself becomes processed or interpreted by the mind.

The [Maha Prajna Paramita Hridaya] Sutra affirms that this boundless mind is Buddha, none other than Buddha, a mind that is everywhere and nowhere, a mind that is both timeless and in the embrace of this moment, a mind that has realized life as eternal. It belongs to no one and to everyone and is a bond of vastness that brings all beings into a unity . . . We see that space is boundless and without boundary; this is the wondrous freedom of openness, no hindrance, our natural freedom, the spirit

and mind of inclusiveness. And our connection with all beings and things is boundless and without boundary as well; this is the wonder of our interdependence, how we live in a seamless world of connections, Indra's net: each jewel reflecting the light of all others, held together in a weave of space and connectivity. Our mind is boundless space; our lives are boundless connections. (Halifax, 2004).

[www.upaya.org/htmls/boundlessly.pdf](http://www.upaya.org/htmls/boundlessly.pdf)

Low (2002) suggests that, "All existence, including life, is essentially dynamic because of an insatiable hunger to restore lost unity" (pp. 90-91).

Christianity records the fall from Eden. The Great Fall represents our birth into awareness, from former unconscious naïve innocence into awareness of our separation. In our fall from Eden (the archaic but unconscious state of original union), separation was realized. We became aware at an increasingly conscious level that we are not living as Whole and are living from a mental-egoic state at the expense of our spiritual aspect (Campbell, 2000; Hillman, 1996; Wilber, 2000, 2006). Eden, which Wilber (1981) calls the Uborous state, was not considered a time of conscious trans-personal bliss but a time of unconscious unity with all nature. The "Fall" is a metaphor for falling out of an unconscious slumber. Sufi mystic and poet Rumi (1995, trans.) wrote;

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep. You must ask for what you really want. Don't go back to sleep. People are going back and forth across the doorsill where the two worlds touch. The door is round and open. Don't go back to sleep.

Once self-aware or conscious of self, this separation triggers the ensuing suffering and struggle to once again become whole with our original radiance in full awareness (Combs 2006). Atman is the Buddha state where "all souls are awakened and enlightened as the Whole" (Wilber 1981, p. 298).

The concept around which all of Taoist mystical philosophy revolves is the infinitely mysterious one of the Tao, which cultivates the middle way. Lao Tzu (1989 Trans.) commented;

Yield and overcome;  
Bend and be straight;  
Empty and be full;  
Wear out and be new;  
Have little and gain;  
Have much and be confused. (Ch. 22).

This demonstrates the paradox and mystery of the middle way. Harvey (1996) offers this interpretation of the Tao;

The Tao is at once the "Way of Final Reality," the transcendent womb out of which all things are born, by which they are sustained, and into which they die; the "Way of the Universe," the rhythm, creative force, and subtle dance of nature and the ordering principle behind all life; and the "Way of Authentic Human Life," of that living in tune with the mystery that is balance, peaceful, reverent, joyful, and simple in all its

claims, needs, and habits (p. 17).

The integration of various facets of religious traditions is summed up by Harvey (1996);

The Christian revelation at its richest contains and reflects Kogi tribe [of Columbia] and Hopi [of North America] knowledge of the interconnection of all life, the Taoist sense of organic balance and the mysterious conjunction of opposites, the Hindu awareness of the grandeur of the soul, the Buddhist devotion to compassion and clear ethical living, the Jewish awe at the unutterable holiness of God, and the sacredness of ordinary life, the Greek adoration of divine beauty, and the Islamic passion for God as beloved. (pp. 169)

When one has experienced unity or Absolute consciousness, there is a consilience and dissolution of boundaries separating even religions occurs. Examining the consilience of physics and eastern religion, Capra (2000) writes of the unity phenomenon and underlying oneness in the universe;

The most important characteristic of the Eastern world view -one could almost say the essence of it- is the awareness of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness. All things are seen as interdependent and inseparable parts of this cosmic whole; as different manifestations of the same ultimate reality. . . The basic oneness of the universe is not only the central characteristic of the mystical experience, but is also one of the most important revelations of modern physics (p. 130).

Regarding pantheism, Peter Russell (2003) posits, “If we identify God with the faculty of consciousness, then the view that consciousness is in everything becomes the view that God is in everything.” (pp.115-116)

### Consciousness

How could Unity experiences be examined without probing consciousness; it is within our conscious awareness that the unity experience is recognized. Exploring consciousness is a journey into paradox and mystery. Like Indra's net, there is an iterative, holographic, reflective quality to this non-linear exploration of consciousness with no end-point, only process, only participation in the exploration. Consciousness, often referred to as awareness of experience, is more accurately described as the awareness of that awareness . Eddinger (1984) writes,

*Conscious* derives from con or cum, meaning ‘with’ or ‘together’, and scire, ‘to know’ or ‘to see’ . . . “thus the root meaning of both consciousness and conscience is ‘knowing with’ or ‘seeing with’ an ‘other’ . In contrast, the word science, which also derives from scire, means simple knowing, i.e., knowing without ‘withness’ . So etymology indicates that the phenomena of consciousness and conscience are somehow related, and that the experience of consciousness is made up of two factors – ‘knowing’ and ‘withness’ . (p.36)

In a post-modern world of complexity and uncertainty, nothing is absolute, however, the pattern that seems to be emerging indicates a shift from a mental structure of rationalizing consciousness to an integral one (Combs, 2002; Gebser, 1985; Wilber, 2006). The mental structure is characterized by Cartesian absolutism is replaced by postmodern relativism, and ultimately post-normative science. The question becomes, can these co-exist without seeking supremacy. Bohm & Peat (2000) write,

It is now possible. . . to look into the question of how consciousness and matter are related. One possibility is to regard them as two generative and implicate orders, like separate but parallel streams that interrelate in some way. Another possibility is that there is only one order, whose ground includes the holomovement and may go beyond. This order will unfold into the two orders of matter and mind, which, depending upon the context, will have some kind of relative independence of function. Yet at a deeper level they are actually inseparable and interwoven . . . In this view, mind and matter are two aspects of one whole and no more separable than are form and content. (p. 186).

Further to this sense of inseparability and dynamic flow physicist Smolin (2001) comments;

The idea of a state in Newtonian physics shares with classical sculpture and painting the illusion that the world is composed of objects. . . But relativity and quantum theory each tell us that this is not how the world is. **They tell us – no, better, they scream at us – that our world is a history of processes.** . . Nothing is, except in a very approximate and temporary sense. (p.52)

Consciousness has been seen as both a mystery and a source of mystery” (Edelman & Tononi, 2000). Kaufman (2000) and Stewart (1998) describe consciousness as a property that is emergent relative to levels of complexity within organisms. Gebser (1985) calls an original structure of consciousness the archaic structure. The concept of structures is bounded and static and does not adequately describe the fluidity and flux of consciousness. The emerging structure is an **integral or aperspectival** model. “Living with time as a tangible reality means living in the manifest world of the present” (Combs, 2002, p. 101). The *diaphanous* or transparent emerges in this structure where perspective is “no longer anchored to the perspectival ego” and reality becomes fluid (Combs 2002, p. 101).

From this original state there was no separation of form from formlessness, all matter was infused with and responsive to a fundamental anima or Spirit. “Looking back on this endeavor of mankind, we can distinguish three consciousness structures proceeding from origin, from the basic archaic structure. These are the magical, mythical and the mental” (Gebser, 1985, p. 37). Perhaps during the archaic phase of our evolution, when unity with all was fundamentally active in all relationships, *unus mundus* was understood at a deeper level than in present times. Humans have evolved in their capacity for creating tools and complexity of thought. Consciousness as absolute is ever-present. Gebser (1985) posits that it is our “tools” of interpreting the world that are evolving.

The numinous experience of one's spiritual aspects or soul's awareness and wisdom

exist in the subliminal. (Hillman, 1996; Moore, 1992) Gebser (1985) suggests that it lies dormant within us as a remnant of our archaic structure until we become aware of our relationship to it. This spiritual division is echoed in our subsequent social division of labour. Durkheim (1983) questioned, “Is it our duty to seek to become a thorough and complete human being, one quite sufficient unto oneself; or, on the contrary, to be only a part of a whole, the organ of an organism?” (p. 41)

Our evolution progresses through, and includes all the preceding structures of consciousness, as we move toward an integral model that brings us back into relationship with a ubiquitous spiritual aspect (Combs, 2002; Gebser, 1985; Wilber, 2006). The teaching of Sri Aurobindo posited that as mankind was evolving upward the Supermind, so too was there a downward involution of forgetting one’s divine connection (Combs, 2002; Dalal, 2001; McDermott, 2001). Concerning these hierarchical levels of consciousness Wilber (1981) comments;

[e]ach level, then, is created by a forgetting of its senior level, so that ultimately all levels are created by a forgetting of Spirit. And thus, *all* levels are *already* forgetful of their Source, their Suchness, their Origin, and their Destiny . . . in the reality of each level, only Spirit [exists]; the agony of each level is that it appears or seems to be separate from Spirit (p. 301).

Newberg, D’Aquili and Rause (2001) point to an evolving brain and neurological system that allows us to perceive and interpret unity experiences. They comment; “. . . we saw evidence of a neurological process that has evolved to allow humans to transcend material existence and acknowledge and connect with a deeper, more spiritual part of ourselves perceived of as an absolute, universal reality that connects us to all that is” (p.9). Including the brain and neurological systems in the study of consciousness does not give them proprietorship, but does include them as “tools” for recognizing patterns and connections.

Wilber (1981) suggests that each successive turn of evolutionary progression in a hierarchical view of reality is proportional to a decrease in illusion. As we evolve toward enlightenment we become more luminous in nature. He suggests that we originated as, and are infused with, pure Spirit or Source. Kay and Regier on post-normative holarchies reflect this iterative relationship; the text/context of self and Unity.

...a generalized version of a traditional hierarchy... with reciprocal power relationships between levels rather than a preponderance of power exerted from the top downwards. ...termed a ‘holon’ because it occurs in a contextually nested or holarchic reality with mutual causality guiding reciprocal interactions between a holon and proximate contiguous holons of different scales- inside, outside and lateral to the holon of interest. (Kay & Regier, 2000, p.7)

Consciousness can be examined from many perspectives; structurally, thematically, interpretively. It can be viewed from its subjective interiority or from its objective content. Combs (1996) offers an ecological view:

Consciousness is viewed here from an ecological perspective in which the ongoing events that structure it are seen as a rich complex of interacting cognitive, perceptual, and emotional processes, not unlike the interactive metabolism of a

living cell. The result is an organic, self-generating, or autopoietic, system, constantly in the act of creating itself.

William James (1904) wrote extensively on the psyche and reflects on consciousness:

For the thinkers I call neo-Kantian, the word consciousness to-day does no more than signalize the fact that experience is indefeasibly dualistic in structure. It means that not subject, not object, but object-plus-subject is the minimum that can actually be. The subject-object distinction meanwhile is entirely different from that between mind and matter, from that between body and soul.

<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/consciousness.htm>

Simultaneous to the philosophical, cognitive science and psychological discussion about consciousness which includes unity experiences, there is the neuroscientific debate. Perhaps this is still the search for the Grail and the location of consciousness, perhaps it is an attempt to begin to approximate two formerly disparate disciplines in the hopes of validation through empiricism. Making significant contributions are Francis Crick and Christof Koch. Here they offer their fundamental premise for advancing neuroscience in the study of consciousness;

We assume that when people talk about "consciousness," there is something to be explained. While most neuroscientists acknowledge that consciousness exists, and that at present it is something of a mystery, most of them do not attempt to study it, mainly for one of two reasons:

- (1) They consider it to be a philosophical problem, and so best left to philosophers.
- (2) They concede that it is a scientific problem, but think it is premature to study it now.

We have taken exactly the opposite point of view. We think that most of the philosophical aspects of the problem should, for the moment, be left on one side, and that the time to start the scientific attack is now.

We can state bluntly the major question that neuroscience must first answer: It is probable that at any moment some active neuronal processes in your head correlate with consciousness, while others do not; *what is the difference between them?* In particular, are the neurons involved of any particular neuronal type? What is special (if anything) about their connections? And what is special (if anything) about their way of firing? The neuronal correlates of consciousness are often referred to as the NCC. Whenever some information is represented in the NCC it is represented in consciousness. (Crick, F. & Koch, C. 1998).

[www.klab.caltech.edu/~koch/crick-koch-cc97.html](http://www.klab.caltech.edu/~koch/crick-koch-cc97.html)

The contemporary interest in what science can contribute to the exploration of consciousness is captivating for many Western scientists, however it is not as contemporary as one might think. W. Penfield began his scientific exploration of consciousness in 1937. Currently, many organizations have sprung up all over the world to explore the science of consciousness. Some other major contributors to this field of study

are Alkire (1998), Baars (1994), Damasio (2000), Haier (1998), James (1998) and Newman (1994). We might remember that in contrast to Western reductionist cognicentric thinking and scientific absolutism there remains the Eastern Taoist philosophy of the middle way. So we see from the literature that what was experienced thousands of years ago by the mystics has been sieved through philosophy, psychology, neuroscience and physics. What is only now beginning to emerge is a consilience across disciplines that may herald a non-dual convergence of thought which may reflect our evolutionary capacity to simultaneously hold paradox and mystery with equal weight.

### Interdisciplinary Consilience

It is interesting to note that this deeply ecological idea of consilience or an omega point is also addressed across various academic disciplines. Mathematician Stephen Wolfram (2002) comments;

“... from the Principle of Computational Equivalence there also emerges a new kind of unity: for across a vast range of systems, from simple programs to brains to our whole universe the principle implies that there is a basic equivalence that makes the same fundamental phenomena occur and allows the same basic scientific ideas and methods to be used” (pp. 6-7).

Wilson (1998) echoes this sentiment from a biologist’s point of view, defining this Consilience as, “...literally a ‘jumping together’ of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact-based theory across disciplines to create a common groundwork of explanation” (p.8). Russell (2002) affirms the central role of consciousness even in the hard sciences:

In the current metaparadigm, consciousness is assumed to emerge from the world of space, time, and matter. In the new metaparadigm, everything we know manifests from consciousness. Space and time are not, however, fundamental dimensions of the underlying reality. They are fundamental dimensions of consciousness....  
Contemporary physics now lends weight to this extraordinary idea. (pp.55-56)  
Stewart (1998) describes this interdisciplinary consilience:

Nonliving physics is capable of far more intricate behavior than it has traditionally been credited with; rigid mathematical schemes can produce astonishingly flexible results. The gap between life and nonlife may well be a non gap: Instead, there is a continuous spectrum of behavior, rigid at one end, gloriously alive at the other – but with no obvious boundary in between. At what stage physics and mathematics cease, and biology takes over, is a matter of taste. (pp. 28-29)

This brings up our fundamental assumptions or ontological perspective. If the world is perceived as separate and discrete individuals, entities or events; as is the Cartesian view, then each piece functions independently of others and of the whole. Our current understanding is that of an interconnected universe of unbroken wholes (Bohm, 1980). Russell (2003) writes, “when science sees consciousness to be a fundamental quality of reality, and religion takes god to be the light of consciousness shining within us all, the two worldviews [science and God] start to converge.” (p.116)

The assumption of separation remains a strong ontology in the Western mindset. It creates a chasm between self and other, other being anyone or anything beyond the confines of perceived self. In this framework, self can be the master of his own reality and is sole agent in its making. But quantum mechanics shifted our Newtonian Cartesian perspective from a dualistic one to a perception of a participatory reality. We are not idle bystanders in a world of separate objects but we are co-creators in a holographic universe. Bohm (1980) offers; “Relativity and quantum theory agree, in that they both imply the need to look on the universe as an undivided whole, in which all parts of the universe, including the observer and his instruments, merge and unite in one totality” (p. 11) This integrated attention may be the greatest value of the new paradigm in terms of learning about transformative learning and change. Russell (2003) writes,

In expanding our worldview to include consciousness as fundamental to the cosmos, this new model of reality not only accounts for the anomaly of consciousness; it also revalidates the spiritual wisdom of the ages in contemporary terms, inspiring us to dedicate ourselves anew to the journey of self-discovery.’ (p.128)

### Dualism

Within the self/other exploration, there lies the opportunity to move from individualism to pluralism to holism; embodied sense of “self” becomes collective. Judith Simmer-Brown (1999) comments on pluralism, “Pluralism acknowledges and relates to one of the most threatening aspects of human life: otherness or difference . . . In pluralism, we commit to *engage* with the other person or the other community” (p. 100).

Examining the self/other relationship (the micro) offers awareness into the macro (dualism at any level including global). Fay (1996) challenges the reader to consider who is agent and what agent intentions might influence the interpretation of an event (or an inquiry). It is an exercise in personal awareness and transformation that has global significance. This journey of discovery meanders through the halls of physical awareness, logical conceptualizing, and liminal interpretation. What soul aspects have been forgotten on the road to intellectual knowing? Self is a matrix, a physical, intellectual, spiritual being, in relationship with others. Each layer of this matrix has benefit in revealing different ways of knowing and understanding. Grof (1998) cautions us about experiencing the world exclusively through embodied selves while omitting our spiritual selves, our divine aspects. Perhaps it is this divine aspect that recognizes order in the universe, soul as embodied order.

### Conclusion

Unity experiences (UE’s) are not new; they are familiar to Eastern and indigenous cultures that perhaps live closer to their relationship with their divine aspect. What is new and interesting to follow in the literature is the pattern of moving in and out of philosophy and science to make meaning of these altered states of consciousness. The trend that is emerging through a review of the literature is a transdisciplinary consilience that allows for paradox and mystery. The other trend that is emerging in the literature is an East-West dialogue that has not been noted until very recently. Finally, an exploration of creating the suitable environment for such glimpses of our divine nature, such as in a meditative state, or indigenous trance state, allows for increasing access to the unity experience. Who knows,



this may eventually create a global coherence effect. What seems missing in the literature is an exploration into the sense of unbounded common to the experience; this is often interpreted as compassion or love. Perhaps exploring UE's from the emotion of love and compassion may reveal interesting findings and another junction in a metapattern. Volk (1994) comments on metapatterns;

Like scientists, the spiritual explorers of states of consciousness seek to open the doors of perception and *see*. . . How? By the drums and drugs of shamans, by all-night circle dances of the bushmen, by sensory deprivation and deep concentration of Buddhists or Christians meditating in desert caves. As the 'ah-has' of scientists vary from the mild daily tremors of routine discovery to the rare earthquakes that shift paradigms, breakthroughs in the states of consciousness also span a spectrum. They vary from the frequent and ritualized altered states of shamans in healing ceremonies to the world-shaking insights from Moses' burning bush, Buddha's sanadhi, and Mohammed's hearing the Koran (p. 217).

Unity experiences are elegant; it is our desire for understanding that is complex. The literature is broad and deep in exploring unity experiences. It is transdisciplinary. Some consilience among the disciplines is emerging and new patterns may be revealed. Researching unity experiences with open hearts and open minds offers great possibilities. In an unbounded universe, can only speculate what lies ahead.

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